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**“The House of Your Church is Burning’’: Race and Responsibility in Marilynne
Robinson’s *Gilead*.”**

“There is no group in history I admire more than the abolitionists, but from their example I conclude that there are two questions we must always ask ourselves – what do we choose not to know, and what do we fail to anticipate?”¹

“And why do I worry so much over this Jack Boughton?”²

There is a revealing moment in his unfinished *Ethics* when Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor and theologian executed in April 1945 for his role in the covert resistance to Hitler, reflects upon the figure of the slave. It comes during his discussion of the preparation of the way of grace required by all who participate in the justifying faith. Bonhoeffer begins this discussion by pointing out that the doctrine of justification presumes that the person has incurred guilt and stands in need of salvation; only she can be justified who has already been the subject of a prior accusation.³ God’s grace is therefore always preceded by some penultimate thing, some action, suffering, or hope, at the end of which it stands. The penultimate realm of mortal existence, rightly considered, is not a state or condition sufficient to itself but the preparation of the way by which grace becomes possible for man. Because God is present and active in the whole of the world, the preparation of the way of grace necessarily involves us in a responsibility towards all those others who share in the divine creation; from the standpoint of redemption responsibility for oneself therefore

¹ Marilynne Robinson, *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (1998; London: Picador, 2005), 251. All further references to this edition are marked DA and incorporated into main text.

² Marilynne Robinson *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004). 209. All further references to this edition are marked G and incorporated into main text.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Ethics* trans Neville Horton-Smith ed. Eberhard Bethge (London: SCM Press, 1955), 83.

always also means responsibility with respect to mankind.⁴ No doxa or freestanding code, Bonhoeffer insists, can decide the exact nature of the spiritual responsibility enjoined upon us in any given situation; instead a responsible Christian ethics requires a free decision by which we each try to establish the will of God in terms of our unconditional obligation to the others in our midst. It is the particular responsibility of the preacher (or “proclaimer of the word”) to help ensure the conditions of life through which goodness and grace may be achieved; this responsibility meets its ultimate test in its response to a situation like slavery which excludes the possibility of free decision upon which the way of grace depends:

“Now from this there follows something which is of crucial importance. For the sake of the ultimate the penultimate must be preserved. Any arbitrary destruction of the penultimate will do serious damage to the ultimate. If, for example, a human life is deprived of the conditions which are proper to it, then the justification of a life by grace and faith, if it is not rendered impossible, is at least seriously impeded. In concrete terms, if a slave is so far prevented from making free use of his time that he can no longer hear the preaching of the word, then this word of God cannot in any case lead him to the justifying faith. From this fact it follows that it is necessary to see to it that the penultimate, too, is provided with the ultimate word of God, the proclamation of the justification of the sinner by grace alone, lest the destruction of the penultimate should prove a hindrance to the ultimate. If the proclaimer of the word does not at the same time take every measure to ensure that the word may be heard, then he is not

⁴ Ibid., 194.

satisfying the claim of the word to pass free and unhindered. The way must be made ready for the word. It is the word itself that demands it.”⁵

Bonhoeffer’s belief that the spiritual promise of grace and redemption was threatened whenever a human life is deprived of the conditions which are proper to it informed his decision to join the religious resistance to Nazi racial tyranny. The story of Bonhoeffer’s intensifying commitment to the anti-fascist resistance, from its beginning in his refusal to abide by the provisions of the so-called Aryan Clause of 1933 prohibiting Jewish Christians from serving as ministers in Protestant churches, to his participation in the Confessing Church from the mid-1930s and his climactic role as an agent for the *Abwehr*, the German military intelligence organisation which became the nucleus for the Officer’s Plot and the various assassination attempts upon Hitler, is also the story of his gradual acceptance of the necessity of direct political opposition to the murderous forces of ethnic particularism and religious persecution. Downcast by the German Churches’ accommodation of the new Nazi regime, he initially decided in late 1933 to leave Germany and accept a Pastorship in England.⁶ Although Bonhoeffer’s move to England may well have been motivated by a desire to attract international support for the religious resistance at home, his decision to quit Germany drew a stinging rebuke from Karl Barth who accused him of abandoning his homeland “while the house of your church is burning” and instructed him to return to Berlin “by the next ship.”⁷ Bonhoeffer’s subsequent return to Germany to head one of the soon-to-be-outlawed seminaries established by the Confessing Church marked him from the

⁵ Ibid., 92-93.

⁶ As Robinson observes, Bonhoeffer’s decision to leave Germany may be partly explained by internal church opposition to the Bethel Confession, which he wrote with Martin Niemöller, and which declared, “It is the task of Christians who come from the Gentile world to expose themselves to persecution rather than to surrender, willingly or unwillingly, even in one single respect, their kinship with Jewish Christians in the Church, founded on Word and Sacrament.” *The Death of Adam* 114-115.

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes, 1928-1936, Collected Works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Volume 1* (London: Collins, 1977) 235.

outset as a political heretic whose steadfast refusal to accept the racial doctrine promulgated by the Nazi state and deepening involvement in the underground resistance led inexorably to his arrest in April 1943 and his murder two years later in Flossenbürg Concentration Camp.

Bonhoeffer's life and teaching has been a continuing presence in the work of the contemporary American novelist Marilynne Robinson. The enduring richness and challenge of Bonhoeffer's thought, Robinson observes in an essay on his theology, lies in its absolute commitment to the universal dispensation of grace and the ethical structure of responsible life. Beyond all else, Robinson points out, Bonhoeffer's theology is a statement of faith in the infinite reach of God's grace and compassion which embraces the whole of life without distinction. Within this faith man is appointed to the sphere of concrete responsibility which knows the world as being created, loved, condemned and reconciled by God and which acts in the world in accordance with this knowledge. The Christian principle is only established for Bonhoeffer in the concrete responsibility of action which springs from the reconciliation of man with man portended by Jesus Christ.⁸ To prepare the way for Christ therefore means to accept responsibility for what he calls the "unity of life" without exception or remainder.⁹ The inviolable foundation of Bonhoeffer's Christian ethics, Robinson reminds us, is that "Christ wills that the weak and persecuted should be rescued, and he must be obeyed; that Christ is present in the weak and persecuted, and he must be honored."¹⁰ His practical fidelity to this ethical obligation would cost him his life. But the ethical commitment of Christian responsibility cannot be evaded: the responsible man is precisely he who assumes responsibility for his neighbour in his concrete possibility.¹¹ As the story of Bonhoeffer's

⁸ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich *Ethics* 202.

⁹ Ibid, 190.

¹⁰ Robinson, Marilynne. *The Death of Adam* 110.

¹¹ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Ethics* 204.

heroic resistance and final martyrdom tragically attests, this ethics of neighbourly responsibility carries with it an unswerving commitment to what he called costly or active grace which, taking up its position against the world *in* the world, seeks to preserve our unconditional obligation to the persecuted other person in our midst:

“Through all this, Bonhoeffer wrote theology – sermons, lectures, circular letters, and books. In a very great degree his writing is characterised by beautiful iterations of doctrine, a sort of visionary orthodoxy. “History lives between promise and fulfilment. It carries the promise within itself, to become full of God, the womb of the birth of God.” To understand his method one must remember his circumstances. He is asserting the claims of Christ in all their radicalism in order to encourage and reassure those drawn to what became the Confessing Church. At the same time, he is chastising those who use Christianity as an escape from the evils of the world and from the duties those evils imply, and he is chastising those who have accommodated their religion to the prevailing culture so thoroughly as to make the prevailing culture their religion. His object is to make core beliefs immediate and compelling, to forbid the evasions of transcendence and of acculturation. He is using the scandal of the cross to discover the remnant church among the multitudes of the religion.”¹²

In the remarks that follow I want to consider how Robinson’s engagement with Bonhoeffer might open up readings of her acclaimed second novel *Gilead* (2004) which restore a proper sense of the troubled racial history at its core.¹³ Although this troubled history recurs throughout the novel in a number of different guises, my discussion will focus in particular

¹² Robinson, Marilynne. *The Death of Adam* 115-116.

¹³ Upon its publication *Gilead* was awarded both the 2005 National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

upon the process of unconcealment, localised partly in the gradual awakening of the repressed but still smouldering memory of the historic burning of Gilead's black church, by which the novel's narrator-protagonist is eventually compelled to confront the enduring legacy of Bleeding Kansas, the question of the proper ethical response to the racial tyranny of the Slave Power, and the contemporary reality of the racial crisis disfiguring 1950s America in the years immediately preceding the great struggle for Civil Rights. My reading therefore proceeds at a certain distance from two influential sets of responses to *Gilead* which either repress any substantive trace of this history from their critical field of vision or invite us to discover the cause of such repression in Robinson's own refusal to come to terms with the wider historical dimension of the events her novel describes.¹⁴ To come closer to a sense both of the principal points at issue in this critical contention and my reason for seeking to develop a reading of Robinson's novel upon very different terms it may be helpful to recall some basic details of *Gilead's* plot and historical contexture. Thus *Gilead* is set in 1956 in the small rural homestead of Gilead, Iowa, where the Congregationalist minister John Ames, now seventy-six years old and with a failing heart, begins a letter to his infant son in the hope of offering him posthumous fatherly counsel concerning the right way "to live a good life" (G: 3). Ames's letter, the letter that becomes the novel, has two principal points of

¹⁴ An example of this second style of reading appears in Christopher Douglas's "Christian Multiculturalism and Unlearned History in *Gilead*." Throughout his article Douglas rebukes Robinson for eliding the "historical Christian support for slavery," dwelling at considerable length on the perceived contradiction between this act of historical occlusion and her repeated stress in her non-fiction upon the importance of "trying to get 'the past' right." Douglas's trenchant conclusion is that the "reason for *Gilead's* evasion of history - its will to not learn historical lessons - is that Robinson conceives of history as the source of what we have come to call "identity" in contemporary American multiculturalism," a process of identity-formation which, in treating history as a kind of memory, permits "the formation of a liberal white Christian identity that 'forgets' about the complexity of actual Christian history." The crucial weakness of this reading of the novel, however, is its dependence upon a structural confusion between author and protagonist. Thus while it is certainly true that Ames treats history as a kind of memory which enables him to repress the ethical demand central to his grandfather's radical abolitionism, his encounters with Jack Boughton are expressly designed by Robinson to enact a type of "rememory" of the past which compels him to confront the continuing trauma of African-American disenfranchisement from Bleeding Kansas to the emerging Civil Rights movement of his own time. See Douglas, "Christian Multiculturalism," 337, 338, 343.

narrative focus: an elliptical and often agonised reflection upon his own recent family history and a plangent meditation upon some of the key tenets of his abiding Calvinist faith. Ames's rehearsal of his family story centres upon the unresolved schism between his father and paternal grandfather over the proper Christian response to slavery in the years immediately preceding the Civil War: Ames's grandfather, a friend and ally of Jim Lane and John Brown, supported Brown's armed intervention into the Kansas War of the mid-1850s before fighting and losing an eye in the Union cause during the ensuing Civil War; his support for violent abolitionism was bitterly condemned by Ames's father, like himself a Congregationalist Minister, whose opposition to slavery was rooted in the principles of Christian pacifism.

Throughout the novel Robinson supplements Ames's habit of historical reminiscence with a second style of narrative expounding elements of his spiritual autobiography in which he meditates upon questions of spiritual good and ethical duty, sin and forgiveness, right perception and responsible action, the preparation of the way of grace and the trace of the redeemed world concealed in all earthy things. Robinson's remarkable ability to harmonise the Christian vision of grace with classical ethical notions of the good or well-lived life, is partly responsible, to my mind at least, for the extraordinary acclaim which accompanied the novel's appearance on behalf of a reading public responsive to modes of perception which might refine and expand our sense of human experience beyond a prevailing ethic of competitive self-seeking and the subordination of social values to the values of the marketplace. What is too often missed, however, by those readings of Ames's narrative beguiled by its insistence that the sacred fount of our common humanity can be inferred from the world in the experience of goodness, forgiveness and love is that this visionary embrace of the idea of universal spiritual community conceals a significant failure of ethical imagination linked in turn to an unresolved historical question of justice and responsibility.

Crucially, this ethical failure occurs in relation to an act of racial exclusion – the incineration of Gilead’s solitary black church and the subsequent dispersal of its congregation – which reawakens unhappy memories of Bleeding Kansas and the slavery wars of the 1850s that led to the original inception of Gilead as a defensive redoubt for radical abolitionist forces. Behind these troubled memories lies the unquiet figure of John Brown, whose uncompromising demand that the universal basis of Christian ethics begins in our absolute responsibility to an absolutely singular other compels us to consider how far Ames’s life and example does justice to his own belief in the unconditional spiritual principle that “we exist in being without remainder” (G: 178). A century later Ames confronts the enduring force of this legacy in his encounters with his godson Jack Boughton, a figure who shares John Brown’s initials and who returns to Gilead to pose a series of searching questions concerning the town’s forsaking of its radical abolitionist inheritance and Ames’s own seeming indifference to the still unfulfilled promise of racial equality a hundred years after John Brown’s passion at Harpers Ferry.¹⁵

¹⁵ To speak in this way of Brown’s “legacy” is to suggest that no sincere attempt to grasp the ethical complexity of abolitionist involvement in the antislavery struggle in 1850s Kansas, least of all one informed like Ames’s own by the Christian principle that we participate in spiritual being without difference or distinction, can properly evade the need to come to some kind of reckoning with Brown’s insistence upon the universal dimension of moral responsibility, the necessary connection between our unconditional obligation to the victims of social persecution and the requirement of practical action, and his demand for a new republican dispensation cleansed of racial discrimination and oppression. To say this is neither to seek to exculpate Brown from the atrocities associated with the name of “Pottawatomie John Brown” nor to succumb to the “lure of transcendence” by following him in deriving justification for political violence in an antinomian conception of moral authority (Taylor, 96). It is, however, to recall to memory that the catalyst for Brown’s martial insurgency into Kansas was to revive the encompassing vision of a universal brotherhood of man proclaimed in the New Testament and denied by those unwilling to resist the murderous abrogation of this universal principle by “proslavery terrorists” during the Kansas war (DeCaro Jr, 12). Against the unsparing historical backdrop of 1850s Kansas, in which what passed for political legitimacy was the unstable and highly contingent effect of an internal economy of violence and where institutional support for the proslavery campaign of terror against abolitionist groupings extended to the Presidency itself, pacifistic and pietistic appeals to an ethics of nonviolence necessarily ran the risk of structural complicity with forces implacably opposed to that opening to the other which constitutes the basis of every ethical relation. In circumstances like these, I want to suggest, part of the violence done to ethical reflection by the memory of John Brown is to remind us of the agonistic location of the ethics of abolitionist history *between* two kinds of violence on the uncertain border between justice and law

My sense of the importance of this radical abolitionist history to a reading of Ames's narrative has been little shared by other commentators upon the novel who have chosen to focus their attention in quite different directions. Variouslly entranced by Ames's unwavering commitment to self-knowledge and right perception in the face of his own impending death and his rapturous celebration of the transcendent beauty of a natural world which incarnates the miracle of divine creation, much of Robinson's audience has elected to read his letter either as a type of sublime secular ethics or a materialised spiritual vision rather than a fraught mediation upon the burden of an historical inheritance. Certainly to the eyes of many reviewers *Gilead* is not merely a great contemporary novel but a great novel about *goodness* which through the grace and scrupulosity of Ames's work and teaching presents an abiding image of what it might be to live a good and responsible life.¹⁶ For some, like Jeffrey Hart, the ethical and aesthetic potency of Ames's style of writing lies in its singular capacity to detach thought and perception from the unreflective flow of

which defines the unstable ground of every genuinely ethical decision. See Andrew Taylor, "Consenting to Violence: Henry David Thoreau, John Brown and the Transcendent Intellectual," *The Afterlife of John Brown* eds Andrew Taylor and Eldrid Herrington (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005); Louis A Decaro Jr., "Black People's Ally, White People's Bogeyman: A John Brown Story," *The Afterlife of John Brown*.

¹⁶ Many examples of this prevailing critical view which identifies the novel's extraordinary aesthetic reverberation with the scope and consolatory power of Ames's own ethical vision might be cited. For James Wood "Gilead is a beautiful work – demanding, grave and lucid . . . Robinson's words have a spiritual force that's very rare in contemporary fiction." In Neel Mukherjee's judgement, *Gilead* is "a book of such meditative calm, such spiritual intensity that it seems miraculous that [Robinson's] silence was only for twenty-three years; such measure of wisdom is the fruit of a lifetime. Robinson's prose, aligned with the sublime simplicity of the language of the bible, is nothing short of a benediction. You might not share its faith, but it is difficult not to be awed, moved, and ultimately humbled by the spiritual effulgence that lights up the novel from within." Echoing Mukherjee's conclusion, Stevie Davies observes that "The slow pulse of Robinson's writing slows the reader's eye and mind, and creates in the reading process a literary version of the narrator's spiritual experience. *Gilead* reminds us that words have power to spare, to forgive, to do justice." Donald Morrison, meanwhile, underscores the ethical foundation of this vision with exemplary concision: "Ames is that rarity in fiction, a thoroughly good man." See James Wood, "Acts of Devotion," *New York Times*. November 28, 2004: 11-12; Neel Mukherjee, "Gilead," *The Times*. April 16, 2005: 16; Stevie Davies, "A Revival of Faith in Fiction," *The Independent*. March 25, 2005: 22; Donald Morrison, "Acts of Devotion," *Financial Times*. March 25, 2005: 26.

everyday speech and opinion, and, in so doing, recall us to our own responsibility for the use we make of the world. In contemplating life from the side of the grave, Hart observes, Ames “achieves a concentration of mind that enables him to see, hear, reflect, his senses so alive to profound experience. . . . As existence becomes conscious of itself it reaches its own edges, sees the world with greater clarity, and wonders about its is-ness.”¹⁷

Sedulously relocating the ethical and aesthetic dimension of Ames’s narrative within the broader theological dimension of Robinson’s work, Christopher Liese meanwhile argues that *Gilead*’s real imaginative drama lies in its enactment of a Calvinist testament of faith which, refusing the stereotypical and forbidding association of Calvinism with aesthetic impoverishment and intolerant asceticism, derives much of its power of spiritual revelation from its scrupulous attentiveness to the beauty of the mundane world that sees such natural resplendence “not simply as an *a fortiori* argument for the beauty of God’s afterlife, but as an experience of the divine itself.”¹⁸ Incarnate within the stream of epiphanies which suffuses Ames’s narrative, Liese suggests, is “an experience of the divine in the immediate and the immanent” that offers a visionary encapsulation of Robinson’s Calvinist faith that God is present and active in the whole of the world; in their beautiful iteration of the belief that the immanence of God can be inferred from the world in the experience of goodness, beauty and love, he concludes, these “irruptions of aesthetic appreciation” become “somehow more essential to the novel’s overall meaning than the plotted sequence of events” containing Ames’s extended family history.¹⁹

¹⁷ Jeffrey Hart, “Now, a Masterpiece,” *National Review* April 11, 2005. 46-47.

¹⁸ Christopher Liese, “That Little Incandescence’: Reading the Fragmentary and John Calvin in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*,” *Studies in the Novel* Volume 41 No 3 (Fall 2009), 351.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 349. Similarly highlighting *Gilead*’s preoccupation with the phenomenology of perception rather than the reverberations set in train by the problem of choosing the right conduct of life in response to more general social forces of violence and exclusion, Laura E. Tanner mobilises current scientific understandings of the neurobiology of consciousness to suggest that what she calls “the cultural force of Robinson’s text” stems “not only from its lyrical rendering of quotidian experience

Those readings that discover the “overall meaning” of *Gilead* in its imaginative fidelity to the ethical or numinous texture of Ames’s own narrative style routinely look for support to passages like the one below where the cultivation of our receptivity to natural beauty promises to restore our sense of the achieved miracle of creation:

“I am thinking about the word “just.” I almost wish that I could have written that the sun just *shone* and the tree just *glistened*, and the water just *poured* out of it and the girl just *laughed* – when it’s used that way it does indicate a stress on the word that follows it, and also a particular pitch of the voice. People talk that way when they want to call attention to a thing existing in excess of itself, so to speak, a sort of purity or lavishness, at any rate something ordinary in kind but exceptional in degree . . . There is something real signified by that word “just” that proper language won’t acknowledge.” (G: 28)

What holds my attention in this passage, however, is the way in which Ames’s particularised and embodied awareness of the singular power of perception is simultaneously ghosted by the trace of some excess or exorbitance which suggests to him that the meaning of our experience, like our language, isn’t simply interior to itself but exists in its openness to an outside or “other” that precedes and exceeds our relation to ourselves. While this momentary insight into the exorbitant or transcendental structure of experience appears on one level wholly consistent with the

but from its powerful unveiling of how dying shapes the sensory and psychological dynamics of human perception. *Gilead* localizes Ames’s psychic struggle with his own death in acts of perpetual processing which it both depicts and thematizes; the novel pushes existential concerns back into the realm of lived experience to explore the way that Ames’s experience of dying traps him in the collapsing space between perception and representation”¹⁹ By so forcefully locating the imaginative apprehension of death at the centre of perception, Tanner concludes, the novel presents a powerful experience of the “embodied psychological dynamics of aging” while offering “one point of entry to broader cultural dialogues about these issues.” Laura E. Tanner, “Looking Back from the Grave: Sensory Perception and the Anticipation of Absence in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*,” *Contemporary Literature* Volume 48, No 2 (Summer 2007), 228, 251.

framework of his Congregationalist faith, it also, I want to argue, exposes a fault-line in his Christian ethics which gradually unsettles the foundations of his entire narrative account. This fault-line manifests itself in a certain incommensurability between the particular and the universal which as Jacques Derrida has shown is intrinsic to the very conception of ethically responsible judgement.

The paradox of responsibility for Derrida is that it is always and at the same time born both from responsibility to a singular other (a neighbour, a lover, God) and to all those other others which constitute the idea of responsibility in general. "Duty or responsibility," Derrida reminds us, "binds me to the other, to the other as other, and ties me in my absolute singularity to the other as other. God is the name of the absolute other as other and as unique."²⁰ Yet as soon as I embrace that notion of responsibility which binds me in my singularity to the absolute singularity of the other, I am immediately propelled into the space or risk of absolute sacrifice because "I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others."²¹ The scandal and the paradox of responsibility consists precisely in the fact that in the moment I enter into a relationship with the other I can respond only by sacrificing ethics either by binding myself to the other to the exclusion of all the other others or, in seeking to align my "ethical" response with the universal concept of duty, failing to respond to the other in the face of the singular demand he makes upon me. To be responsible, Derrida concludes, I must fail either in my responsibility to the other in his absolute singularity or to all the others, to the "ethical and political generality," and the sacrifice

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* trans David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) 68

²¹ *Ibid.*, 68.

necessarily required by this decision can never be justified.²² Against this background *true* responsibility demands that I act in the memory and the name of the sacrifice I make in choosing *between* this one and that one, between this path and its alternative, and, in so doing, continue to endure the trial of the unjustifiable decision that paradoxically constitutes the ground of any ethical, theological, or political order of responsibility.

Derrida's insight into the paradox between absolute responsibility (responsibility to the singular other in our midst) and responsibility in general (or ethics) offers a provoking insight both into Ames's deeply ambivalent response to the contention over slavery which tore his family apart and his continuing guilt at taking his father's side of the story. The shadow cast upon Ames's thinking by the paradoxical structure of responsibility may be glimpsed in a pivotal passage where he reflects upon one of the central issues at stake in his Christian ethics:

"There is an important thing, which I have told many people, and which my father told me, and which his father told him. When you encounter another person, when you have dealings with anyone at all, it is as if a question is being put to you. So you must think, What is the Lord asking of me in this moment, in this situation? If you consult insult or antagonism, your first impulse will be to respond in kind. But if you think, as it were, This is an emissary from the Lord, and some benefit is intended for me, first of all the occasion to demonstrate my faithfulness, the chance to show that I do in some small degree participate in the grace that saved me, you are free to act otherwise as circumstances would seem to dictate. You are free to act by your own lights. You are freed at the same

²² Ibid., 70.

time of the impulse to hate or resent that person. He would probably laugh at the thought that the Lord sent him to you for your benefit (and his), but that is the perfection of his disguise, his own ignorance of it." (G: 124)

Several aspects of this passage repay attention. It is instructive, to begin with, to note the rhetorical similarity between Ames's phrasing here and Bonhoeffer's earlier remarks regarding the indispensability of free decision to ethical responsibility and the coming of grace ("This is an important thing, which I have told many people"); throughout *Gilead* Robinson artfully interweaves Bonhoeffer's credal language with Ames's own in ways which redirect our attention to the former's crucial distinction between "cheap grace" or "religiosity" that "uses Christianity as an escape from the evils of the world and from the duties those evils imply" and the "costly grace" of actively embracing our Christian duty to oppose persecution and injustice wherever it appears.²³ Secondly, the lesson Ames yearns to impart to his son was passed down to him via his father from his grandfather; these words carry a history, that is, inseparable from the ethical demand they make upon us. And, third, the structure of ethical response as it is given here resolves nothing but rather suspends us between an unconditional obligation to the absolutely other ("When you encounter another person") and the obligation to all the *other others* ("when you have dealings with anyone at all") which upholds our responsibility to any ethical or spiritual generality. In such a situation, as Derrida reminds us, the two equal and conflicting demands placed upon us by our responsibility to the other in our midst produce "a paradox and aporia not resolved by a simple choice or decision between the two, but rather an aporia that exposes the undecideability within, and inherent violence of, every choice or decision."²⁴ Ethical responsibility, we might say, is born in a moment of decision which reveals the irreducible

²³ Marilynne Robinson, *The Death of Adam* 115.

²⁴ Nicola Anderson, *Derrida: Ethics under Erasure* (London: Continuum, 2012) 90.

violence of every ethical decision. No formal precepts or system of rules can determine the content of this choice about the right conduct of life; it follows that any Christian ethics worthy of the name must always involve a *certain* antinomianism (“You are free to act by your own lights”) by which we become absolutely responsible for how and to whom we respond in the abyssal space of (ir)responsible decision.

Because Ames’s meditation upon his grandfather’s parable immediately follows a period of perturbation during which he acknowledges that his “only role is to be gracious” in his dealings with his recalcitrant godson Jack Boughton, it is tempting to read it as the culminating expression of that Christian ethics based upon boundless compassion, the heroic act of forgiveness and humane devotion to justice in the world which Robinson celebrates in Bonhoeffer’s gospel.²⁵ But implicit in this Christian parable, as we have seen, is the trace of a very different vision of responsible action which reveals the potential violence of every ethical decision. The question posed to us in the encounter with another person, to put this differently, does not ask us to choose between responsibility and irresponsibility but implicates us rather in the insoluble and paradoxical contradiction between absolute responsibility and responsibility in general. Caught up in this paradoxical contradiction, we have to *decide*, and in deciding we *always* risk doing violence to the other that is not *this* other, or to every *other* other, or to *this* other in the name of *every* other. There is, for this reason, no *non-violent* ethics or responsibility; in our dealings with others we are instead always already implicated in an economy of violence, and an irreducible element of any ethics is to acknowledge the necessary violence of our own acts of responsible decision.

What makes Ames’s rehearsal of this parable so unsettling to the story he wishes to tell is that it inevitably returns us to the unresolved question his letter periodically opens only

²⁵ Marilynne Robinson, *The Death of Adam* 111.

immediately to close down: the ethical stakes of the dispute between his father and grandfather which finally tore his family apart. For Ames's grandfather, following John Brown, the outcast figure of the slave enjoins upon us the ethical imperative to respond to the call of the other in its absolute singularity before and beyond our responsibility to ethical generality (or law), especially when that generality presents itself in political and institutional form as an instrument of dispossession and destitution. In doing violence to law, such ethics violates its obligation to a general and universal responsibility in the belief that in acting irresponsibly it is being responsible to God. Ames's father, meanwhile, condemns abolitionist violence by appealing to the principles of Christian pacifism which, in their dutiful observance of the biblical injunction against killing and legal prohibitions upon armed resistance, necessarily risk failing in its absolute and irreducible responsibility to the singular other (the slave). The situation of the slave is utterly precarious, and a decision must be made, and yet *either* response can only come into force by means of an irresponsible leap of faith that brings its own ethics into question. In preferring his father's example Ames establishes his allegiance to Christian ethics by betraying the singular responsibility he professes to uphold; he is therefore at once the most ethical and unethical of men, compelled by the necessity of decision into uneasy and guilty fidelity to a version of responsible action with which he cannot keep absolute faith. Suspended between two equal, because absolutely imperative, demands and marooned against his will in the aporetic space of the (ir)responsible decision, the ethics of Ames's narrative is consequently not to be found in a lexicon concerning responsibility circling the question of the good life but rather in a type of abyssal equivocity and a form of unknowing knowing which continually undermines the terms of his own accounting by reinscribing the force of the radical and uncompromising commitment to the absolute other which goes by the names of the grandfather, John Brown,

and Jack Boughton, whose return to Gilead make Ames bear reluctant witness to the paradoxical but necessary knowledge that “There is never just one transgression” (G: 122).

The amplifying effects of Ames’s unhappy suspicion that in identifying with his father’s spiritual example he has sacrificed something essential to a responsible ethics reveal themselves in a number of ways. Their presence can be felt in Ames’s very first description of his relation to his father:

“I believe I’ll make an experiment with candor here My father was a man who acted from principle, as he said himself. He acted from faithfulness to the truth as he saw it. But something in the way he went about it made him disappointing from time to time, and not just to me. . . . Well, see and see, but do not perceive, hear and hear but do not understand, as the Lord says. I can’t claim to understand that saying, as many times as I’ve heard it, and even preached on it. It simply states a deeply mysterious fact. You can know a thing to death and be for all purposes completely ignorant of it. A man can know his father, or his son, and there might still be nothing between them but loyalty and love and mutual incomprehension.” (G: 7)

Already perceptible here is Ames’s studied ambivalence of tone which, contrary to his reputation for faithful witness and honest dealing, allows him both to acknowledge the reality of inconvenient or intolerable truths while standing slightly apart from their field of implication. Leaving aside whatever effect his remark that he will here make an “experiment” with candour might have upon our trust in the general reliability of his account, his self-cancelling phrases and pronominal vagueness keep us at a crucial and mystifying distance from the “truth” he would impart. The impression given by these sentences that Ames is teetering upon the brink of a costly admission which he cannot yet

quite compel himself to make appears in the way they invite an ironic detachment from his father (to act in principle “as we say ourselves” may not necessarily be consistent with principled action) which is simultaneously avowed and annulled (how could he do otherwise than act with faithfulness to the truth “as he saw it”? Is there another measure of responsible belief?). As Ames proceeds his artful interplay of avowal and disavowal gradually hollows out everything it touches: what is the “something” in the way his father goes about “faithfulness to the truth that makes him disappointing “from time to time” and not just to Ames (but to how many others)? By the time Ames concludes his reflection, the enigma of what he is trying to persuade us – the “deeply mysterious fact” that we can know a “thing” to death and yet still be completely ignorant of it – is matched only by the urgency of his need to say it, convinced as he apparently is that it reveals some vital and irreducible element of the nature of worldly experience.

A clue that Ames’s radically equivocal style of writing arises in part from his desire to come out from behind his father’s saying and confront some undisclosed portion of his grandfather’s memory quickly follows. Immediately after his brief experiment with candour Ames provides the first glimpse of his vexed family history by telling the story of the childhood trip he undertook alongside his father more than sixty years ago in 1892 to locate his grandfather’s grave in neighbouring Kansas. After the old man’s abandoned grave is discovered the pair “worked a good while at putting things to rights”; it was during this time that Ames’s father recounted his own childhood memory of being awakened during the night by the sound of John Brown’s mule coming down the steps of his father’s Gilead church. Entering the church to find the floor covered in the blood of one of Brown’s wounded comrades, he was hastily washing away the unmistakeable evidence of his father’s complicity in Brown’s incendiary anti-slavery insurgency when he was disturbed by the sudden arrival of a U.S. Army soldier hot in pursuit of “Osawatimie John Brown.” This

solder was likely the same soldier his father later shot and winged while covering Brown's retreat; the following Sunday the old man preached abolition from the pulpit wearing one of Brown's men's bloody shirts while his gun hung from his belt. "I never dared to ask him what he'd been up to," Ames's father dismally concludes about these turbulent childhood years, "I couldn't risk the possibility of hearing things that were worse than my suspicions." Upon hearing this story, and stepping for the first time upon the ground of the bitter family schism, Ames is suddenly overwhelmed by "a pity that was far too deep to have any particular object." (G: 110)

Crucially for my purposes, this image of the grandfather engenders an excess of feeling which refuses to stay in its proper channels by opening up multiple and potentially antithetical points of attachment. Such feeling goes *beyond* the father or the grandfather by occupying a space *between* them, but their dispute permits no common ground, and so Ames can only respond to one, and therefore to the other, by sacrificing one *to* the other in the necessary violence of the ethical decision. Throughout his narrative, however, Ames's troubled awareness of his violent sacrifice of some aspect of ethical responsibility in the name of ethical duty expresses itself in a kind of linguistic excess or double-focus which abruptly suspends the sacrificial process by placing him, if only for a moment, upon *both* sides of what it means to decide.

A provoking example of the kinds of afterthought and misgivings generated in Ames's narrative by his grandfather's memory appears in his reflection upon the nature of baptism as blessing. "There is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily," Ames observes to his son, "It doesn't enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is a power in that. I have felt it pass through me, so to speak. The sensation is of really knowing a creature, I mean really feeling its mysterious life and your own mysterious life at the same

time" (G: 23). Ames's grandfather, meanwhile, transposes an intimation of sacred *knowledge* into a question of ethical *responsibility*: for him the reality in blessing he perceives in the wounds he received during active service on the Union side in the Civil War is inseparable from the obligation to identify with the persecuted other in its singular exposure to power:

"He told me once that being blessed meant being bloodied, and that is true etymologically in English – but not in Greek or Hebrew. So whatever understanding might be based on that derivation has no scriptural authority behind it. It was unlike him to strain interpretation that way. He did it in order to make an account of himself, I suppose, as most of us do" (G: 36)

Ames's defensiveness upon this point is revealing. To grasp what might be at stake for Robinson in these remarks we need to bear in mind that while Ames's grandfather may well be "straining interpretation" in understanding the reality in blessing in this way, in so doing he nevertheless anticipates Bonhoeffer's crucial ethical distinction between "cheap" and "costly" grace. Far from using Christianity as an escape from the evils of this world and the duties those evils imply, the old man's revaluation of blessing as ethical commitment to principled action prefigures Bonhoeffer's uncompromising stress upon the responsible need to oppose "the passions of collective life that can at any time emerge to disgrace us."²⁶ What makes the comparison particularly telling is that it is at precisely this point in his narrative where he reconsiders blessing as the effect of principled, because ethically necessary, intervention in the realm of power's dominion that Ames first confesses, in howsoever occulted a fashion, that it wasn't mere loneliness which led the old man to abandon Gilead but the traumatic memory of antebellum racial violence incarnated by the burning of its black church:

²⁶ , Marilynne Robinson, *The Death of Adam* 113.

"Then he was terribly lonely, no doubt about it. I think that was a big part of his running off to Kansas. That and the fire at the Negro Church. It wasn't a big fire - someone heaped brush against the back wall and out a match to it, and someone else saw the smoke and the flames and out the flames out with a shovel. . . . I didn't know the Negro pastor myself, but he said his father knew my grandfather. He told me they were sorry to leave, because this town had once meant a good deal to them." (G: 36-37)

Despite, or indeed, because of Ames's deeply equivocal response to this incident – it is only a "small" fire to those blind to the history of murderous prejudice concealed within it – his text now begins to splinter under the weight of another layer of historical consciousness which his own voice works continually to repress.²⁷ Partly this fracturing reveals itself in the tone of vexatious self-recrimination – it is remarkable, notwithstanding critical testimony to Ames's serene self-repose, just how *angry* he is and how continually he struggles to "control my temper" – which takes increasing possession of his narrative (G: 6"). Elsewhere, however, it manifests itself in Ames's obsessive troping of the image (and the memory) of fire itself which has the effect of splitting his narrative between two radically opposed, although absolutely inseparable, visions of what it might be to find a spiritual home in the world.

Two consecutive scenes illustrate these rival dimensions of Ames's text. The first gives marvellous expression to his vision of the reality of spiritual life as a "kind of incandescence" at work in each of us, "the 'I' whose predicate can be 'love' or 'fear' or

²⁷ My reading of the fire at the Black Church as an historical echo of the civic conflagration over the racial question known as "Bleeding Kansas" accordingly stands at a necessary distance from Lisa M. Siefker Bailey's symbolic interpretation of fire in *Gilead* in spiritually renewing and redemptive terms as "a representation of the energy of being, which can become destructive like the Puritanical mistakes made in Ames's grandfather's church, or transcendent, like the filling of the Holy Spirit." Lisa M. Siefker Bailey, "Fraught with Fire: Race and Theology in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*," *Christianity and Literature* Volume 59: No 2 (Winter 2010), 265

‘want,’ and whose object can be ‘someone’ or ‘nothing’ and it won’t really matter, because the loveliness is just in that presence, shaped around ‘I’ like a flame on a wick, emanating itself in grief and guilt and joy and whatever else” (G: 44-45). Continuing to try to convey the inner reality of an experience, he tells us, he has never before attempted to describe, Ames’s narrative then drifts irresistibly back to the memory of a childhood outing he took with his grandfather to a baseball game in Des Moines to watch the African-American player Bud Fowler, where an unexpected thunderstorm put a premature end to proceedings:

“When he was young, he was an acquaintance of John Brown, and of Jim Lane, too. I wish I could tell you more about that. There was a kind of truce in our household that discouraged talk about the old times in Kansas, and about the war. It was not long after the trip to Des Moines that we lost him, or he lost himself. In any case, a few weeks later he took off for Kansas.

I read somewhere that a thing that does not exist in relation to something else cannot itself be said to exist. I can’t quite see the meaning of a statement so purely hypothetical as this, although I may simply lack understanding. But it does remind me of that afternoon when nothing flew through the air, no one slid or drifted or tagged, when there was no waltz at all, so to speak. It seems to me that the storm had put an end to it, as if it were a fire to be put out, an eruption into this world of an alarming kind of nullity Null. That word has real power. My grandfather had nowhere to spend his courage, no way to feel it himself. That was a great pity.” (G: 47)

Revealed here in the paradoxical structure of knowing as unknowing and unknowing as knowing is the underlying structure of Ames's entire narrative.²⁸ In revisiting the memory of the baseball game Ames's thoughts unexpectedly turn to a statement he once read that the meaning of a thing exists not simply in its particularity or singularity but always also in its relation to some other thing or things in general. Implicit in this statement is a premonitory glimpse of the originary paradox between absolute (the thing in itself) and general responsibility (the thing in its inseparable relation to an outside which constitutes ethics as such) concealed at the core of his grandfather's parable about the nature of the ethical encounter. Revealingly, Ames's first response is to refuse to acknowledge the reality of this general horizon of sense ("a statement so purely hypothetical"), but as recollection recomposes itself in his mind the persisting presence of this irreducible generality becomes inseparable from the scene of memory itself which exists "as if it were a fire to be put out, an eruption into this world of an alarming kind of nullity," a visionary intuition which binds the outrage of the church fire to the "nullity" of any response which fails to recognise within it the trace of a collective historical trauma. Momentarily shocked into recognition by the self-implicating force of this unwelcome revelation, Ames can only preserve his equanimity by projecting this perception of failed response out *onto* his grandfather, sacrificing in the process an essential part of his responsibility to the past. His nascent, although necessarily occulted, awareness of the ethical cost of his own work of repression nevertheless becomes apparent in his very next sentence ("As I write I am aware that my memory has made much of very little") where too little has also been made of so much that still remains to be confronted.

²⁸ For an insightful discussion of Robinson's use of baseball as a "cultural metonym" for both broader patterns of racial segregation and Ames's own "amnesia" concerning this troubled racial history see Susan Petit, "Field of Deferred Dreams: Baseball and Historical Amnesia in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead and Home*," *MELUS: Multi Ethnic Literature of the US* Volume 37 No 4 (Winter 2012) 119-37.

The complex work of repression at work here becomes even more explicit in Ames's first direct account of his father's attitude to his own father's radical abolitionist commitments:

"My father was born in Kansas, as I was, because the old man had come there from Maine just to help Free Soilers establish the right to vote, because the constitution was going to be voted on that would decide whether Kansas entered the Union slave or free. Quite a few people went out there at the time for that reason. And, of course, so did people from Missouri who wanted Kansas for the South. So things were badly out of hand for a while. All best forgotten, my father used to say. He didn't like mention of those times, and that did cause some hard feelings between him and his father. I've read up on those events considerably, *and I've decided my father was right. And that's just as well, because people have forgotten.*" (italics mine; G: 75-76)

Such is the force of repression at work here that it hovers upon the brink of a double negation: my father wanted people to forget the past, and that is just as well, because people have forgotten. A similarly compulsive pressure exerts itself in the extraordinary accompanying scene where Ames's father, upon discovering a gun owned by the boy's grandfather, first buries it, then returns some hours later to dig it up and rebury it, before returning a month later to dig it up a second time and throw it into the river. Watching his father Ames cannot but become aware that he is witness to a violent compulsion; as his father finally disposes of the gun's shattered remains Ames "got the impression he wished they didn't exist at all, that he wouldn't have really been content to drop them in the ocean, that *he'd have set about to retrieve them again from any depth at all if he'd thought of a way to make them vanish entirely*" (G: 79; italics mine). Ames's father's purpose in attempting this violent destruction of historical residues is to "disremember" the past in Geoffrey Hill's sense of the

term: disremembering not, that is, as mere “forgetting” or “failing to remember” but as “dismembering the memory.”²⁹ Crucially, however, this destructive assault upon the past fails to achieve its objective because the action of violent repression generates a psychological excess or supplement which manifests itself in the paradoxical desire continually to recover and re-present the object of fearful memory in order that it may be repudiated with ever increasing force in a ceaseless dialectic of revelation and disavowal. Precisely this desire is reproduced in the complex interplay between knowing and unknowing which animates Ames’s reflection upon his father’s exorbitant actions:

“So I was predisposed to believe that my grandfather had done something pretty terrible and my father was concealing the evidence and I was in on the secret, too – implicated without knowing what I was implicated in . . . I believe I was implicated, and am, and would have been if I had never seen that pistol. It has been my experience that guilt can burst through the smallest breach and cover the landscape, and abide in it in pools and danknesses, just as native as water. I believe my father was trying to cover up for Cain, more or less. The things that happened in Kansas lay behind it all, as I knew at the time” (G: 81-82)

To invoke the original fratricidal story against the background of the Kansas War over slavery is, however, necessarily to beg the question: Who stands in for Cain in bearing responsibility for the murder of his brothers? Where Ames’s guilty foreboding upon this point abides here in the ambivalence of his phrasing – what does it mean to say that his father “covered up” for Cain more or less? – it later bursts through to cover the entire landscape of his narrative as he watches his father preaching in the immediate aftermath of his grandfather’s final departure for Kansas:

²⁹ Geoffrey Hill, *Style and Faith* (New York: Counterpoint, 2003) 3.

“But I would watch my father preaching about Abel’s blood crying out from the ground, and I’d wonder how he could speak about that the way he did. I had so much respect for my father. I felt certain that he should hide the guilt of his father, and *that I should also hide the guilt of mine.*” (G: 85; italics mine)

In the second half of *Gilead* Robinson begins to expose Ames’s troubled identification with his father’s teaching to a different kind of truth by crossing the story of Cain and Abel with the parable of the Prodigal Son. Pondering his friend Boughton’s melancholy quotation “Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward,” Ames reflects “An old fire will make a dark husk for itself and settle in on its core, as in the case of this planet. I believe the same metaphor may describe the human individual as well. Perhaps Gilead. Perhaps civilization. Prod a little and the sparks will fly” (G: 72). He is compelled to confront some of the implications of this same metaphor in the very next paragraph when he hears the news of the return to Gilead of his godson and namesake John Ames (Jack) Boughton. Jack Boughton left Gilead in disgrace decades ago having fathered, then abandoned, a daughter who later died in impoverished neglect, a tragedy which harrowed his father’s conscience and further grieved Ames by reminding him of the death in childbirth of his own child Angeline many years before. The magnitude of Boughton’s offence appears even more appalling to Ames in light of his belief that in dishonouring a child we deny some portion of the living will of God at work in each of us. “[N]ow that I am about to leave this world, I realize that there is nothing more astonishing than a human face,” Ames observes at one point, thinking back to the few precious hours he cherished Angeline, “It has something to do with incarnation. You feel your obligation to a child when you have seen it and held it. Any human face is a claim on you, because you can’t help but feel the singularity of it, the courage and loneliness of it.” (G: 66) In failing in his response to his child, Boughton

therefore always also fails in his more general ethical responsibility to what binds us to our own and to our fellows in the form of our common humanity.

Perhaps the most remarkable, and for Ames disquieting, aspect of his renewed relationship with Boughton is the way he gradually becomes implicated by the terms of his own judgement. From their earliest acquaintance Ames had always been aware of an “element of parody” in Boughton’s unconscious assumption of his own preacherly manner; what he once dismissed as mere parody now reappears as a demand to rethink his own Christian ethics in the face of his responsibility to the singular child (G: 120). Driven out of Tennessee by the combined force of segregationist intolerance and anti-miscegenation laws following his marriage to an African-American woman and his fathering of a mixed-race son, Boughton’s despairing return to Gilead presents a traumatic racialized reminder of how much in what should bind us in our absolute responsibility to the other as other is still left out of account in modern American life in the century since Ames’s grandfather fought in Kansas.

The challenge Boughton presents to Ames’s Christian ethics abides in the implicit question which hangs over the novel: why can’t he simply move his family home to live securely and at peace in Gilead? The answer when it comes – that the shock of Boughton’s interracial marriage might kill his Minister father in his physical debility – becomes doubly disconcerting by folding Ames himself back into its field of implication:

“He drew a long breath. He said, ‘You know my father so well.’

But I can’t give any assurances about this, one way or the other. I’d hate to be wrong. You’ll have to let me reflect on it.

Then he said, ‘If it were you and not my father – ‘

Now I could see his point in putting that question, since Boughton and I are in general very much of one mind. *But it was not so simple a question as he might have thought*, and I paused over it" (G: 229-230; italics mine)

The centrality of the racial question to the vexed relationship between the sacred and the secular at the core of Gilead Congregationalism is further underscored in *Home*, Robinson's first sequel to *Gilead*, where the dying Reverend Boughton is visibly perturbed by televised images of protestors marching for Civil Rights. In tracing out the occlusion in Ames and his father's angle of vision which prevents him from reconciling himself to their sense of the truth of the Christian religion, Boughton returns insistently to the figure of Ames's grandfather:

"He just sat there for a while, and then he said,' A friend of mine, no, not a friend, a man I met in Tennessee – had heard about this town, and he had also heard of your grandfather. He told me some stories about the old days in Kansas that his father had told him. He said that during the Civil War Iowa had a colored regiment. '

'Yes, we did. And a greybeard regiment and a Methodist regiment, as they called it. They were teetotallers, at any rate.'

'I was interested to learn that there was a colored regiment,' he said. I wouldn't have thought there were many colored people in this state.'

'Oh, yes. Quite a few colored people came up from Missouri in the days before the war. And I think quite a few came up from the Mississippi Valley, too.'

He said, 'When I was growing up, there were some Negro families in this town.'

I said, 'Yes, there were, but they left some years ago.'

'I remember hearing about a fire at their church.'

'Oh yes, but that was *many* years ago, when I was a boy. And it was only a small fire. There was very little damage.'" (G: 171)

Working on Ames's mind like the return of the repressed, the effect of this exchange with Boughton is to dislocate him from the sense of his own sentences by suspending him between two different versions of what it means to respond. Following their conversation he finds himself afflicted once more with "that old weight in the chest, telling me there is something I must dwell on, because I know more than I know and must learn it from myself." (G: 179) Chief among these things is his abiding sense of his failure to respond to the demands of responsibility itself, which arises from "a tendency, in my thinking, for the opposed sides of a question to cancel each other more or less algebraically – this is true, but on the other hand, so is that, so I discover a kind of equivalency of considerations that is interesting in itself but resolves nothing" (G: 140). Insofar as the intractability of the demand Boughton embodies compels Ames's reluctant recognition of the possibility that it may sometimes be necessary to transgress ethical duty in order to fulfil it, it also confirms the justice of his suspicion that "often enough, when we think we are protecting ourselves, we are struggling against our rescuer." (G: 154) That the route to such rescue must pass through a proper reckoning with the unclaimed portion of his grandfather's inheritance becomes clear in the extraordinary passage which relocates the scene of Ames's present bewilderment to the contested landscape of the Kansas War:

"I have wandered to the limits of my understanding any number of times, out into that desolation, that Horeb, that Kansas, and I've scared myself too, a good many times, leaving all landmarks behind me, or so it seemed. And it has been among the true pleasures of my life. Night and light, silence and difficulty, it seemed to me always rigorous and good. I believe it was recommended to me by Edward, and also by my reverend grandfather when he made his last flight

into the wilderness. I may once have fancied myself such another tough old man, ready to dive into the ground and smoulder away until Judgement. Well, I am distracted from that project now. My present bewilderments are a new territory that make me doubt I have ever really been lost before.” (G: 191)

And yet it may perhaps be the case, as Shakespeare’s late romances remind us, that first we must be lost in order to be found. The implications for *Gilead* of this visionary statement may be glimpsed in the fact that it is only by means of his desolating dislocation into the “new territory” of uncertain belief that Ames is able to begin the complex work of redemption through which he brings some measure of absolution to Boughton by taking his guilt and distress upon himself. Yet what is too often overlooked by critical accounts of the novel – but which glimmers fitfully in the overdetermined phrase “new territory” that folds Ames’s text back upon the divided ground of Bleeding Kansas – is that this restitutive movement requires that he first confront the historical trauma encoded in his perception of Boughton as “a man standing too close to a fire.” (G: 191). Ultimately it is only by relinquishing his (ir)responsible fidelity to one version of his family narrative and suspending himself *between* the law of the father and grandfather that Ames can come into possession of the story he fears and needs to tell which conserves within its longing for the “ecstatic fire” of grace the memory of a burning church and the ex-static structure of the truly responsible decision (G: 197).³⁰

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